

## **Back Again, Back Again: King, Part 1**

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

**Abigail, as the intro:** Back Again, Back Again, episode three: King.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

**Ilyaas:** I woke up in a bed, rather than the ground I'd been expecting as I came back into a strange half-conscious state.

And -- it wasn't my bed, in Georgia, which was what the other half of my subconscious had still been expecting. No fan ticked overhead. No fairy lights shone back at me, quiet incandescence.

No. I was still... there, that other-place, feeling odd and yet more like myself than I had in my entire life. Magic trilled

in my chest, the same strange power I'd felt before passing out in the courtyard with the Enarbol.

It was real, whatever had happened. I was -- *eligida*. Chosen by -- someone. Something.

A girl sat at the end of the bed, bronze-skinned and long-haired, one braid trailing over her shoulder and tied with a ribbon. She traced the lines of embroidery on the blanket with one hand, fingers gently running along the stitches. She hadn't realized I was awake.

This girl is important. We become friends, but not right now. There's still miles to go before we're there.

I realized, with a jolt, that the sword I'd pulled from the tree wasn't around me -- the loss was sharp and sudden, an ache in my chest that settled into an off-kitler buzz. The girl startled into focus as I pushed myself upright, heart pounding as I scanned the room.

It was -- wrong. For the sword to not be with me.

Even then, having just woken up, I could feel it -- the magic in my blood. And how it called out for what the ancient tree had given me.

I --

I still find myself reaching for the magic. Searching for the glow that used to come so easily -- to call the will of the earth to my side and to conjure -- *something*.

I haven't. Been able to. And it's --

I --

I don't like it. Being this empty.

*Where's my sword?* I asked her, half-feral. She flinched, just slightly, and I only just had time to remember that no one here seemed to know English beside the prince and kings before she responded, carefully, eyes still set on the embroidery of the blanket.

*It is outside,* she said, *right where you left it when you... fell.*

*I need it,* I said, hungrily, but she didn't move. I opened my mouth to try and explain the tugging in my chest, but before I could, the strange girl spoke again.

*We could not touch it.*

*What?*

*We could not touch it,* she repeated. *To bring it inside. It is... too much.*

I was too preoccupied to dissect what the hell that implied. *Please,* I said. *I need it. I -- what's your name?*

She lifted her head, finally. Her eyes were dark as night, lashes long and full around them. *Rhia*, she responded.

*Rhia*, I said. *I'm Ilyaas. Please help me.*

*Ilyaas*, she repeated carefully. *Hello.*

*Please*, I echoed, and she nodded, so I clambered from the bed, almost running to the door.

Rhia caught my hand. *Not yet. You can not leave while you are wearing that.*

I looked down. The hobbit shirt stared back.

*I don't have other clothes*, I said, finally.

She grinned, a little thing she tried to push down, tongue pressed to the backs of her teeth. *It's okay*, she said, *we have prepared for a long time.*

It was as we found clothes that I asked her how she knew English, if so few did. And it was as I dressed that she explained it to me -- my back to her, her eyes trained on the bedspread's embroidery, fingers skimming the patterns in polite propriety.

*I am the only person in the castle that does*, she explained, *besides the prince and the kings. Ever since the first soldier/poet/king, there has been one daughter of Rhysea that learns, in case the new Eligida is of their time.*

*That's what this place is?* I asked. *Rhysea.*

Yes, she said, and lapsed back into silence as I tried to figure out the laces on my new boots.

*And you know English --* at her odd expression, I corrected -- *my language -- in order to...*

*Teach you our own. And to help you through.*

*I see,* I said, and paused, an odd stutter in my chest. *Friend,* my heart said, but I tried not to get too ahead of myself. *Thank you.*

She smiled another tiny perfect smile. I turned around. *I'm ready to go.*

She nodded. *You look better.*

The shirt -- thing -- was long-sleeved, the sleeves just slightly puffed Shakespeare-style, and off-white, a ribbon running through at an empire waist to pull in what was an otherwise loose shirt at the back. Golden flowers ran up the sleeves towards my shoulders as if I'd grasped the hands of Midas. Leather boots, mid-calf height, hugged my legs.

We joke about stomping boots here, right? Boots that're meant to fight in. These were of the same stuff.

*Thank you,* I said, and grinned. *Can we find my sword now?*

She hesitated, for just a second, a slight back-and-forth in place before seeming to make up her mind.

*Come on*, Rhia said, starting for the door. *It will still be in the courtyard -- where you dropped it.*

I followed her out and closed the door behind us. The hallways were tall-ceilinged and wide, made of old stone and lamplight. This was the first time the lack of electric light truly hit me. The court was glass-ceilinged. It was bright as day, there. The room I'd just been in, too, had a large window.

There were no windows along here.

Three hallways and a staircase melted into a grand foyer, which became the open-aired halls like you see in Harry Potter movies.

And then we were outside, and Rhia started to run, so I sprinted after her in my boots and Midas-stained shirt and I was so focused on her, on not looking like a fool, that I didn't even realize the tree until we were at its' base, the canopy pulling us in. It seemed different than before -- the leaves, I realized, as one fell past my face, had become veined in coppery-gold.

I caught it as it went by. Rhia pointed to the sword, strewn across the grass where it had fallen. My blood hummed as

I picked it up, somehow expecting the jolt that struck through me as everything once again slid into focus.

The sword once more began to glow. This time, I had a better chance to inspect it as I raised it up: engravings decorated the blade, miniscule lines of script and scenes of girls -- three girls, repeated over and over along the blade -- one singing, carrying a stringed instrument as gold and and wind sighed from her mouth, another with a sword raised, a crooked crown on her brow, and a third, hands cast outward, as magic bloomed from her palms. And they repeated together, as well, embracing and riding and fighting, back-to-back, against an army of men. Flowers curled around the story-scenes, blooms like peonies and lily-of-the-valley cradling the girls on the blade. Rhia's breath caught as she stared at it.

*What does it say?* I asked carefully, tilting the blade back and forth so the engravings caught the light.

Rhia peered at the writings, carved along the base of the blade, close to the guard. *They will tear your city down*, she said carefully, *The soldier and poet and king.*

I know those words by heart. *Perit perriber civitad de ilms, rex et poeta et soldat.*

We -- and you, you who bears this sword -- will make collapse this city. Will overthrow what came before, you soldier and poet and king.

Or: go and tear this city down.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

**Abigail, as the outro:** Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. You are important in this world and have a role that no one else can fill but you. You are loved. I hope you have a wonderful day.